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T-26

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FIRST CLASS

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Dear Dave:

As a birthday present I am sending you a translation of a story by Horacio Quiroga. I don't know whether or not you will like the story, but I thought that any way you might find it interesting to encounter this author. I think some of his novels have been translated into English, but I question whether many of his short stories are available in English.

By the way, in regard to the implication in my last letter that I see you as weak, I'd like to qualify that, since you might think the judgement is harsher than what I intend. As I see it, you appear to be deficient in the ability to exercise energy or stand up to uncomfortable things <u>on your own initiative</u>. But on the other hand I think you have an inner toughness that would enable you to perform well if <u>circumstances forced you</u> to exert yourself under difficult

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conditions. I have some notions about the reasons for these characteristics, but at present I will refrain from speculating.

I received your last letter and note that it shows your usual generosity of character. Instead of being sore over the negative parts of my attitude toward you, you were favorably impressed by the positive parts.

—Ted.

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For October 3, 1985

THE WILD COLT

Horacio Quiroga

He was a colt, an ardent young horse, who came from the back-country to the city to make his living by exhibiting his speed.

To see that animal run was indeed a spectacle. He ran with his mane flying in the wind and with the wind in his dilated nostrils. He ran, he stretched himself out, he stretched himself still more, and the thunder of his hooves was beyond measuring. He ran without rules or limits in any direction over the wild plains and at any hour of the day. There were no tracks laid out for the freedom of his run, nor was his display of energy constrained by any norms. He possessed extraordinary speed and an ardent desire to run. Thus he put his whole self into his wild dashes -- and this was the strength of that horse.

As is usual with very swift creatures, the young horse was not much good as a draft-animal. He pulled badly, without heart or energy, with no taste for the work. And since in the back-country there was barely enough grass to support the heavy draft-horses, the swift animal went to the city to live by his running.

At first he showed the spectacle of his speed for nothing, for no one would have given a wisp of straw to see it -- no one knew the kind of runner that was in him. On fine afternoons, when the people thronged the fields on the outskirts of the city, and especially on Sundays, the young horse would trot out where everyone could see him, would take off suddenly, stop, trot forward again sniffing the wind, and finally throw himself forward

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at full speed, stretched out in a mad run that seemed impossible to surpass, and that he kept surpassing every moment, for that young horse, as we have said, put into his nostrils, into his hooves and into his run the whole of his ardent heart.

People were astonished by that spectacle that departed from everything that they were accustomed to see, and they left without having appreciated the beauty of that run.

" No matter," said the horse cheerfully, "I will go to see an impresario of spectacles, and meanwhile I will earn enough to live on."

What he had lived on until then in the city he himself would hardly have been able to say. On his own hunger, certainly, and on waste thrown out at the gates of the stockyards. He went, therefore, to see an organizer of festivals.

"I can run before the public," said the horse, "if I am paid for it. I don't know how much I may earn, but my way of running has pleased some men."

"No doubt, no doubt," they answered. "There is always someone who takes an interest in such things .... But one must have no illusions ... . We may be able to offer you a little something as a sacrifice on our part ..."

The horse lowered his eyes to the man's hand and saw what he offered: It was a heap of straw, a little dry, scorched grass.

"It's the most we can do ... and besides ... "

The young animal considered the handful of grass that was the reward for his extraordinary gift of speed, and he remembered the faces that men made at the freedom of his run that cut

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zigzags across the beaten paths.

"No matter," he told himself cheerfully. "Some day I will catch their attention.[1] Meanwhile I will be able to get along on this scorched grass."

And he accepted, satisfied, because what he wanted was to run.

He ran, therefore, that Sunday and on Sundays thereafter, for the same handful of grass, each time throwing himself heart and soul into his running. Not for a single moment did he think of holding back, of pretending, or of following ornamental conventions to gratify the spectators, who didn't understand his freedom. He began his trot, as always, with his nostrils on fire and his tail arched; he made the earth resound with his sudden dashes, to finally take off cross-country at full speed in a veritable whirlwind of desire, dust, and thundering hooves. And his reward was a handful of dry grass that he ate happy and rested after the bath.

Sometimes, nevertheless, as he chewed the hard stalks with his young teeth, he thought of the bulging bags of oats that he saw in the shop windows, of the feast of maize and of fragrant alfalfa that overflowed from the mangers.

"No matter," he said to himself cheerfully,"I can content myself with this rich grass."

And he kept on running with his belly pinched by hunger, as he had always run.

But gradually the Sunday strollers became accustomed to his free way of running, and they began to tell each other that that spectacle of wild speed without rules or limits gave an impression

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of [illegible].

"He does not run along the tracks, as is customary," they said, "but he is very fast. Perhaps he has that acceleration because he feels freer off the beaten paths. And he uses every ounce of his strength."

In fact, the young horse, whose hunger was never satisfied and who barely obtaired enough to live on with his burning speed, gave every ounce of his strength for a handful of grass, as if each run were the one that was to make his reputation. And after the bath he contentedly ate his ration -- the coarse, minimal ration of the obscurest of the most anonymous horses.

"No matter," he said cheerfully. "The day will soon come when I will catch their attention."

Meanwhile, time passed. The words exchanged among the spectators spread through and beyond the city, and at last the day arrived when men's admiration was fixed blindly and trustingly on that running horse. The organizers of spectacles came in mobs to offer him contracts, and the horse, now of a mature age, who had run all his life for a handful of grass, now saw competing offers of bulging bundles of alfalfa, massive sacks of oats and maize -- all in incalculable quantity -- for the mere spectacle of a single run.

Then for the first time a feeling of bitterness passed through the horse's mind as he thought how happy he would have been in his youth if he had been offered the thousandth part of what they were now pouring gloriously down his gullet.

"In those days," he said to himself sadly, "a single handful of alfalfa as a stimulus when my heart was pounding with the desire

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to run would have made me the happiest of beings. Now I am tired."

He was in fact tired. Undoubtedly his speed was the same as ever, and so was the spectacle of his wild freedom. But he no longer possessed the will to run that he had had in earlier days. That vibrant desire to extend himself to the limit as he had once done cheerfully for a heap of straw now was awakened only by tons of exquisite fodder. The victorious horse gave long thought to the various offers, calculated, engaged in fine speculations concerning his rest periods[2]. And only when the organizers had given in to his demands did he feel the urge to run. He ran then as only he was able; and came back to gloat over the magnificence of the fodder he had earned.

But the horse became more and more difficult to satisfy, though the organizers made real sacrifices to excite, to flatter, to purchase that desire to run that was dying under the weight of success. And the horse began to fear for his prodigious speed, to worry that he might lose it if he put his full strength into every run. Then, for the first time in his life, he held back as he ran, cautiously taking advantage of the wind and of the long, regular paths. No one noticed -- or perhaps he was acclaimed more than ever for it -- for there was a blind belief in the wild freedom of his run.

Freedom ... No, he no longer had it. He had lost it from the first moment that he reserved his strength so as not to weaken on the next run. He no longer ran cross-country, nor against the wind. He ran over the easiest of his own tracks, following those zigzags that had aroused the greatest ovations.

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and in the ever-growing fear of wearing himself out, the horse arrived at a point where he learned to run with style, cheating, prancing foam-covered over the most beaten paths. And he was deified in a clamor of glory.

But two men who were contemplating that lamentable spectacle exchanged a few melancholy words.

"I have seen him run in his youth," said the first, "and if one could cry for an animal, one would do so in memory of what this same horse did when he had nothing to eat."

"It is not surprising that he used to do such things," said the second. "Youth and hunger are the most precious gifts that life can give to a strong heart."

Young horse: Stretch yourself to the limit in your run even if you hardly get enough to eat. For if you arrive worthless at glory and acquire style in order to trade it fraudulently for succulent fodder, you will be saved by having once given your whole self for a handful of grass.

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NOTES

1. "Some day I will catch their attention." The original has "Algún día se divertirán." The usual meaning of divertir is "to entertain", so that a possible translation is, "Some day they will be entertained [by me]." But the dictionary also gives as a meaning of divertir: "to divert, distract (the attention of)", and this is the basis for the translation I have given above, which I think makes better sense in the context.

2. "Engaged in fine speculations concerning his rest periods." I'm unsure of this translation. The original has: "Especulaba finamente con sus descansos."

COMMENTS

The idea of this story is not very original, but I think that Quiroga expresses it beautifully.

Somerset Maugham seems to have held a contrary point of view to that of Quiroga's story. In Of Human Bondage he has the experienced painter Foinet advise an aspiring young artist: "You will hear people say that poverty is the best spur to the artist. They have never felt the iron of it in their flesh." With a lot more in the same vein; and this seems to have represented Maugham's own attitude. Apparently Maugham had some disagreeable experiences with poverty in his youth. But Quiroga too seems to have known poverty. In the introduction to the collection of his stories that I have, one of the many occupations ascribed to him is that of "penniless globetrotter," and he is quoted as having

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said in Paris: "I would trade [literary] glory for the security of being able to eat three days in succession."

I suppose there's no way of definitively resolving the conflict. What leads to creativity in one person is not necessarily what leads to creativity in another.

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